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SUBJECT: SARG'S NEW VP SHARA'A: PROMOTED OR MOVED ASIDE,  
AND DOES IT MATTER?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for  
reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Observers here express uncertainty about the degree to which former FM Farouk al-Shara'a received a promotion when President Bashar al-Asad moved him from the Foreign Ministry to the Vice Presidency. One contact sees it as a SARG signal that it is ready to re-engage with the U.S. and the West when conditions improve. The dominant view is that Shara'a will continue to exercise strong influence over the direction of Syria's foreign policy for the foreseeable future. The manner in which Asad took action seems to indicate that policy differences between him and Shara'a were less significant than imagined, especially as opponents to engagement with the U.S. and the West gained the upper hand in the regime. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Observers here express uncertainty about the degree to which former FM Shara'a received a promotion when President Asad moved him from the Foreign Ministry to the Vice Presidency and promoted DFM Walid Mu'allim to FM. Embassy contact Maan Abdul Salaam speculated that Asad had two goals with the Shara'a-Mu'allim shuffle. Asad named Shara'a VP as a reward and as an acknowledgment to the Syrian public of Shara'a's long-time service to the Asad regime, he said. Separately, Asad moved Mu'allim to the head of the MFA as a signal that Syria was ready to re-engage with the U.S. and the West when conditions for it improve, said Abdul Salaam. Regime proxy and foreign policy analyst Imad Shueibi also saw a pro-Western message in Asad's move. In his view, the promotion of Mu'allim, known to be pragmatic and very knowledgeable about the U.S., indicates that Asad wants to re-engage with the U.S. Conversely, Shara'a's "promotion" is a clear indication that he is being shelved, despite any window dressing. He called Shara'a "a stupid man" who had given bad advice to President Asad, including in the period before the war with Iraq.

¶3. (C) Several contacts tell us that Shara'a is not going gently into a pre-retirement sinecure. He is making strenuous efforts to bulk up the staffing and influence of the office of Vice President to help him maintain his foreign policy influence. UNDP legal consultant Ghimar Deeb said on March 6 that Shara'a "vacuumed" the MFA of direct phone lines, cars and "80 percent of the best personnel" during the move to his new post as Vice President. Mu'allim's son, who works at UNDP with Deeb, has to call his father on his cell phone because the new FM has no direct line into his office, Deeb said.

¶4. (C) Shar'a's success in placing his protg and cousin, former Syrian PermRep to the UN, Faisal Mikdad, as Deputy

Foreign Minister, also allows Shara'a to stay on top of any moves by Mu'allim to eliminate his grasp over the MFA, at least for the short term. (Note: Mikdad, like Shar'a, is from Dar'a.) Shueibi described Mikdad as a Shara'a clone but expressed the hope that "he can learn." (Comment: Mu'allim is at retirement age, heightening the expectation that Mikdad, a fellow Sunni, is ideally positioned to succeed elder statesman Mu'allim when he vacates the post in a few years.)

15. (C) Under Mu'allim, any MFA reform would be aimed at improving the Ministry's performance and modernizing the bureaucracy rather than changing key Syrian foreign policies, contacts tell us. Some contacts assert that Shara'a's continued influence at the MFA will likely stymie any reform efforts for another year or so, until his influence and contacts there wane as Mu'allim asserts himself. UNDP officials hope that with Mu'allim's promotion they will eventually be able to revamp the Ministry's structure, including changes in how Syrian diplomats are selected, Deeb said. Every two years, the SARG administers a written and oral exam for the diplomatic service, but the real selection criteria are candidates' personal connections, Deeb said. Mu'allim and UNDP officials had spoken in the past about a joint project to modernize the MFA bureaucracy, but Shara'a had opposed such a move, said Deeb, noting that the MFA's convoluted pay and personnel structure also complicated a reorganization.

16. (C) COMMENT: Internal and external critics have long singled out Shara'a as the source of failed SARG policies, particularly in regard to Lebanon after the humiliating withdrawal of Syrian forces from its long-dominated neighbor. Criticism of Shara'a's performance from inside Syria reached a crescendo in the period between October to December of last year, between the issuance of the two Mehlis reports. Since January, however, much of that criticism has dissipated as it became clear that Syria had adopted -- and seemed to be benefiting from -- a relatively hard-line posture that reflected Shara'a's long-established positions. Nonetheless, there remained lingering reservations from inside the regime about Shara'a's lack of PR skills, as evidenced in the unnecessary embarrassment he caused the regime in his mid-December UN dust-up with British FM Jack Straw, over the second Mehlis report. Asad eventually chose a moment when he faced the least amount of pressure on the issue to ease Shara'a out of the MFA, as part of an expected cabinet reshuffle, and offer him a long, respectful good-bye. The manner in which Asad took action seems to indicate that policy differences between the two were less significant than imagined, or that they diminished as opponents to engagement with the U.S. and the West gained the upper hand in the regime. Shara'a's lengthy exit from foreign policy decision-making via the Vice Presidency also seems to point to an Asad management style that prizes loyalty and seeks where possible to make decisions that might be favorably viewed in the West at a moment of relative strength so as to avoid the appearance of acting under duress.

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